



News Analysis: olive oil scandal hits Italy's agriculture sector

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ROME, Feb. 8 (Xinhua) -- Italy's agriculture sector suffered another blow last week when police seized thousands of kilograms of green olives tainted by a toxic substance.

Reports on the size of the bust vary: media reports say the figure could be as high as 85,000 tons of olives, though Gianni Cantele, president of the Apulia chapter of agricultural industry group Coldiretti said the accurate figure is around 10,000 kg.

About 40 percent of Italy's olive production comes from the Apulia region in southern Italy, which produced at least some of the tainted fruit in the latest case.

Even if the lower figure is accurate, it is the latest public relations problem for a sector that in recent years has already weathered image problems tied to multiple cases of counterfeit or contaminated wine, bogus olive oil, and unsafe mozzarella cheese.

High-end food products are among Italy's most important economic sector, one of the few parts of the economy that has proved resilient during Italy's long economic malaise.

Key observers say that while no single scandal could hurt such a large sector, over time, repeated scandals can have an impact on public opinion.

"This is a serious issue," Cantele said in an interview. "In addition to the direct economic impacts, something like this damages the image of Italian agriculture, which is something we cannot risk."

In the latest case, hundreds of millions of year-old olives were treated with a chemical called copper sulphate. The treatment changes the color of the old olives to bright green, making them look fresh. The compound also helps mask the bitter taste prevalent in older olives.

At least 19 people have been arrested in the case, with more arrests possible, according to police.

According to Daniela Sciarra, the top agriculture sector analyst with the environmental group Legambiente, copper sulphate can damage human skin and eyes if there is direct exposure, and cause serious intestinal issues if digested in high quantities. When the substance leaks into bodies of water it can kill marine life, and in the soil it can kill small plants.

"It is a crime that copper sulphate was used in this way," Sciarra told Xinhua.

But according to Alberto Mattiacci, an economics professor at Rome's La Sapienza University and president of the Italian Marketing Society, law enforcement's seizure of the tainted olives should be looked at as a kind of victory.

"Italy's agricultural sector is enormous and these occasional problems show the system works," Mattiacci told Xinhua. "Of course, it's a serious problem that it happens at all. But the correct way to look at it is that when something like this happens, the people behind it are caught."

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